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ABSTRACT

The Adult Learner Competencies Project included literature research and consultation with adult education practitioners in Pennsylvania to establish learner competencies that could be used by all adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) providers in the state. During the project, existing and emerging lists of adult learner competencies were researched and analyzed, which resulted in the development of lists of basic and higher order skills as well as extended literacy skills (such as time management, systems knowledge, interpersonal skills). The skills were divided into basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of expertise. These lists established a foundation of skills that were applicable across many adult life roles such as family members, workers, and citizens. Sample applications of the skill competencies in each role were included at each level. The skill competencies will provide opportunities for practitioners to refine curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices to better meet the educational needs of learners. (Contains 39 references and a sample matrix linking skills, applications, and assessment.) (KC)

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OF ADULT
LITERACY

FINAL REPORT

Research and Development of Pennsylvania-Specific Adult Learner Competencies in Family, Work, and Community Contexts

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FINAL REPORT

Research and Development of Pennsylvania-Specific Adult Learner Competencies in Family, Work, and Community Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Project No.: 98-7008

Grant Recipient: Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy
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telephone number: 814-863-3777

Program Name: Research and Development of Pennsylvania-Specific Adult Learner Competencies in Family, Work, and Community Contexts

Grant Allocation: $27,265

Project Period: July 1, 1996 - June 30, 1997

Project Directors: Eunice N. Askov and Barbara Van Horn

Project Purpose:

The purpose of the Adult Learner Competencies Project was to research the literature and consult with adult education practitioners in the Commonwealth to establish learner competencies that could be used by all Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) providers in Pennsylvania.

Project Outcomes:

Project staff researched and analyzed existing and emerging lists of adult learner competencies, resulting in the development of lists of basic and higher order skills as well as extended literacy skills (e.g., time management, systems knowledge, interpersonal skills). The skills were divided into Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced levels of expertise — generally aligned with skill levels commonly used in ABLE programs as well as in common standardized assessment instruments (e.g., *Tests of Adult Basic Education*, *CASAS*, *WorkKeys*). These lists established a foundation of skills applicable across adult life roles as family members, workers, and citizens. Sample applications of the skill competencies in each role were included at each level.

Impact:

The purpose of this project was to generate a list of learner competencies. Although a work group of practitioners reviewed and offered feedback concerning the product, providers did not begin using the lists of competencies during the project year. As a result, the learner competencies did not have an immediate impact on the field. Potential use and impact of the learner competencies on ABLE services in Pennsylvania are included under *Conclusions and Recommendations* outlined below, and in the final report narrative and competencies report.

Product/Training Developed:

Two documents were developed as a result of the project, including this final project report and the learner competencies report, *Adult Learner Skills Competencies: A Framework for Developing Curricula in Adult Contexts and Linking Instruction to Assessment.*

Products Available From:

The products are available through the Pennsylvania Literacy Resource Centers in Harrisburg and Gibsonia, Pennsylvania. Information about the project can be obtained by contacting the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, College of Education, The Pennsylvania State University, 102 Rackley Building, University Park, PA 16802-3202.

Project Continuation:

During Fiscal Year 1997-98, the Bureau of ABLE is supporting an Adult Education Act Section 353 project to develop products to assist practitioners in using the competencies in their programs. This project, *Linking Adult Learning Competencies to Contextualized Curricula, Instruction, and Assessment* (Project No. 98-8003), will produce 1) a resource guide of commercially available, Internet-based, and Section 353 products linked to the competencies and their application in adult contexts and 2) a professional development module to provide training and support for practitioners integrating the competencies with their program curriculum and assessment plans.

Conclusions/Recommendations:

The skill competencies will provide several opportunities for practitioners to refine curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices to better meet the educational needs of learners. It is recommended that practitioners use the competencies 1) as a framework for designing curricula and instruction that reflect adults' roles and their application of basic skills within these contexts; 2) to link specific basic skills development more closely with learner-selected activities and tasks; and 3) to link curricula to program assessment plans. It is recommended that programs participating in the EQuaL initiative use the competencies as a backdrop for reflecting on current instructional and assessment practices and developing program improvement plans. Finally, it is recommended that the Bureau of ABLE use the competencies framework to expand efforts to document learner gains and, ultimately, contribute to improved accountability procedures for Pennsylvania ABLE programs.

Additional Comments: Originally, this project planned to generate a list of learner competencies linked directly to adult life roles (i.e., family member, worker, citizen/community member). After careful consideration, this plan was modified to focus on identifying the underlying basic skills needed to perform tasks or achieve goals within adult life roles. The SCANS report calls these skills "foundation skills"; the National Institute for Literacy's *Equipped for the Future* initiative calls them "generative skills". Emphasis was placed on encouraging practitioners to 1) teach learner skill competencies in the relevant and meaningful contexts of adult life roles and 2) include opportunities for learners to practice the skills in various contexts to promote skill transfer.

Research and Development of Pennsylvania-Specific Adult Learner Competencies in Family, Work, and Community Contexts

Introduction

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the Adult Learner Competencies Project was to research the literature and consult with adult educators in Pennsylvania to establish learner competencies that could be used by all Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) providers in Pennsylvania. These competencies provide a framework through which practitioners can refine curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices to better meet learners' educational needs. They also provide the Bureau of ABLE with a tool to use in refining documentation of learner gains and, ultimately, contribute to improved accountability procedures.

Two documents were developed as a result of the project, including this final project report and the learner competencies report entitled *Adult Learner Skills Competencies: A Framework for Developing Curricula in Adult Contexts and Linking Instruction to Assessment*. The learner competencies report provides a rationale for the skills lists as well as suggestions for implementing the competencies in ABLE programs. Basic and higher order skills as well as extended literacy skills (e.g., time management, interpersonal skills) are described. These skills are divided into Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced levels of expertise — generally aligned with skill levels commonly used in ABLE programs and in common standardized assessment instruments (e.g., *Tests of Adult Basic Education*, *CASAS*, *WorkKeys*). The lists establish a foundation of skills applicable across adult roles as family members, workers, and citizens. Sample applications of the skill competencies in each role are included at each level to illustrate opportunities for teaching the skills within various contexts.

Time Frame

The project was conducted between July 1, 1996 and June 30, 1997.

Key Personnel

Co-Principal Investigators *Dr. Eunice N. Askov* and *Barbara Van Horn* were assisted

by two graduate students in adult education: *Andreé Catalfamo* and *Laura Reed-Morrisson*. Dr. Askov and Ms. Van Horn identified resources and analyzed data on learner competencies. Ms. Van Horn, with assistance from Ms. Reed-Morrisson, synthesized the data and produced the competency lists. Ms. Catalfamo assisted in reviewing, and summarizing current literature on adult learner competencies. Ms. Van Horn also supervised research activities, led working group meetings, drafted recommendations and the final report, and coordinated dissemination efforts. *Working group* members included ABLE program directors and teachers: Karen Bergey (English as a Second Language instructor), Mary Hohensee (literacy council director), Ruth Zak (GED instructor), Jeff Woodyard (ABLE program director), and Ella Morin (Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of ABLE). Two Professional Development Center (PDC) administrators, Sandy Strunk (Southeast PDC) and Carol Molek (South-Central PDC) also participated in the working group. This group reviewed and suggested adaptations to the draft competencies, and delineated further activities related their implementation.

Audience

Adult education providers as well as Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education staff should find this research useful as part of overall program improvement plans and accountability measures. Program administrators, counselors, and instructional staff (teachers and tutors) also have a tool in the lists of adult learner competencies that can be used to develop adult curricula in relevant contexts and, potentially, to design competency-based assessments.

Dissemination

Permanent copies of this final report and the competencies product are kept on file at Pennsylvania's Literacy Resource Centers:

AdvancE
333 Market Street, 11th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

and

Western PA Adult Literacy Resource Center
5347 William Flynn Highway, Route 8
Gibsonia, PA 15044-9644

Information about the project also can be obtained by contacting the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, College of Education, The Pennsylvania State University, 102 Rackley Building, University Park, PA 16802-3202.

Statement of Problem

Changing Adult Basic Education Environment

Nationally, adult basic education programs face a number of issues that will significantly impact the way in which states provide these educational services. Demands for increased accountability, changes in adult education legislation and funding (e.g., block grants), and concerns about the quality of adult curriculum and learner assessment practices have resulted in statewide efforts to improve the adult basic education delivery system . In Pennsylvania, the Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy's (ABLE's) EQuAL initiative has been the broad umbrella under which ABLE providers have examined current practices, planned program improvement, and implemented programmatic changes.

Program Accountability

Program accountability, mandated in the Adult Education Act as amended by the National Literacy Act of 1991, emphasizes assessment and program standards. A greater emphasis on accountability in the past several years has had repercussions at the state and local level, pressing program providers to better document their programs' effectiveness and impact on adult learners. Unfortunately, policymakers — who also make the decisions concerning funding for most adult basic education services — are not convinced that adult education programs are effective. Based on existing reports, it is difficult to find persuasive evidence that adult education programs have a broad impact on adult learners' growth in skills and knowledge. According to both a recent evaluation of adult education programs (Development Associates, 1994) and a recent study by the General Accounting Office (GAO, 1995), evaluating the performance and quality of these programs is highly problematic due to recurrent problems in collecting and analyzing information about program activities. Data from programs are often incomplete, inaccurate or otherwise difficult to interpret (Development Associates, 1994). Establishing accountability in adult education programs is difficult for a number of reasons: diversity of program and learner goals; questions about the validity of assessments administered (e.g., Venezky, Bristow and Sabatini, 1993); and practitioners'

perception that prevailing standardized basic skills tests provide too little useful information to instructors to warrant their administration. As a result of these and other problems (e.g., sporadic patterns of participation), it has been difficult for programs to amass credible evidence of their overall effectiveness and impact on adults' acquisition of basic skills and knowledge (Development Associates, 1994; GAO, 1995; Moore and Stavrianos, 1995).

Neither a recent large scale evaluation study of a welfare-to-work program in California (Martinson and Friedlander, 1994) nor that of the national Even Start Program (St. Pierre, Swartz, Murray, Langhorst, & Nickel, 1993) has found significant impacts of adult education on assessed literacy abilities. Nationally, the absence of convincing evidence that programs substantially increase learners' literacy abilities makes it increasingly important for the field explore ways that will help programs better demonstrate their impact on learners' skills and, in fact, justify the importance of providing adult education services at public expense.

Changes in Legislation and Funding

In addition to the emphasis on program accountability, ABLE programs are soon to be faced with a major change in the delivery system. As the anticipated transition to block grant funding of adult education and other services takes place, it will become even more important that practitioners and policymakers have the research findings, information, and practical tools to help design, implement, and evaluate programs. As part of this transition, ABLE providers also will be expected to work closely with other agencies and workforce development boards to provide coordinated services for an overlapping pool of adults.

Curriculum and Learner Assessment

Curriculum

In its 1995 Annual Report, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) reports that the majority of programs use "functional skill competency teaching materials purchased from a variety of publishers" as well as "everyday source materials such as newspapers", job applications, and instructional manuals (PDE, 1995, p. 39). Flexibility is an essential element in providing instructional materials on relevant topics to adult learners; however, this flexibility

has drawbacks. Notably missing from this description, for example, is mention of a generally accepted adult education curriculum. Pennsylvania does not have an overarching curriculum to guide its ABLE programs. This is not to say that programs do not use curricula. In fact, nearly 20 years ago, Sebring (1978) developed a curriculum outline aligned with Adult Performance Level-based competencies in the areas of consumer economics, occupational knowledge, community resources, government and law, and health. Based on a review of Section 353 Abstracts from the past 15 years, many Section 353 grants have produced curricula on specific topics, such as workplace literacy (e.g., Goertzel, 1983; Turrentine, 1992) or life skills (e.g., Gordon & Fogelman, 1983), and on discrete literacy skills, such as phonics (e.g., Gordon & Spence, 1984) or writing (e.g., Zellers, 1988). These projects as well as other locally developed curricula are useful and often effective in meeting program and learner goals; however, most are not widely used by other ABLE programs in the state. Based on information in the abstracts, it appeared that these curricula have been used to guide instruction but not necessarily to guide assessment of learner gains. As such, they are of limited value in terms of program accountability.

Assessment

PDE's Annual Report (1995) states that 74% of adults enroll in ABLE to accomplish school-related goals (improve basic skills, improve English, obtain diploma/GED, and qualify for entry to post-secondary training/education). Attainment of these goals may be measured readily via standardized tests or simple measures of the number of adults enrolled who, in fact, enter postsecondary settings or obtain diplomas/GEDs. However, up to 26% of adults enrolled in ABLE programs have less specific and harder to define or measure goals (e.g., improve job prospects, improve competency in areas other than basic skills, help children with homework). Programs will need assistance if they are to develop measures that better document learners' achievement of these "harder to define" goals and outcomes.

Adult Learner Competencies

Discussion about and lists of adult learner competencies, competency-based

assessments, and adult learner outcomes are not new. These issues have been discussed and adult competencies defined, for example, in Australia (Adult Community and Further Education Division, Office of Training and Further Education, 1993; Coates, Fitzpatrick, McKenna, & Makin, 1994-5) and Britain (Cambridge Training and Development, Ltd., 1992). Nationally, the U. S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (1985) and the U. S. Department of Labor (Peterson, Mumford, Borman, Jeanneret, Fleishman, 1995; Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991) have explored competencies for adults learning English as a Second Language and those required by the workforce, in general, and in specific occupations. Other efforts have explored national systems related to adult learner competencies (e.g., Adult Training and Development Network, 1995; Askov, 1996; Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1988; National External Diploma Program, 1995; Stein, 1995).

At the state level, several Section 353 Special Demonstration projects have focused specifically on competencies (e.g., Bell, 1992; Harrisburg City School District, 1978; Royce & Malesic, 1979; Zellers, 1987). For the most part, these projects listed competencies as part of local curriculum development efforts rather than with the purpose of implementing them across the state. Efforts to develop statewide or state-specific competencies to guide adult education activities are a fairly recent development. Educators in Iowa, Washington, and Connecticut, for example, have developed state-specific lists of adult competencies (Taylor, Wanage, & Ilas, 1995; Office of Adult Literacy of the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, 1995; Alamprese, 1993). The California Department of Education (1992) also has developed competencies for adults participating in English as a Second Language programs.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of the Adult Learner Competencies Project was to produce a framework on which Pennsylvania ABLE providers can build curricula, focus instruction and programmatic goals, plan assessment strategies, and guide the selection of instructional materials. A core of skill competencies with applications in adult contexts (i.e., work, family, community) will help plan educational services and explicitly demonstrate the relation, for example, between literacy

instruction and workplace skills. The competencies also can guide the definition of "hard to measure" personal goals which, in turn, will be easier to measure and document. These efforts in to improve educational services to adults enrolled in ABLE programs will expand providers' ability to document their programs' effectiveness.

The specific objectives of the project were:

1. To research and analyze existing and emerging lists of adult learner competencies to reflect the application of basic and higher order literacy skills within relevant adult contexts.
2. To produce Pennsylvania-specific lists of adult learner competencies and recommendations for integrating the competencies with ongoing ABLE efforts.
3. With the assistance of a working group and others, to review the project products and validate adult learner competencies appropriate for adult education programs in Pennsylvania.

Procedures

The following section of the report details procedures used to meet the project objectives.

1. Research and analyze lists of adult learner competencies to reflect the application of literacy skills within relevant adult contexts.

Collection of Information

Project staff contacted staff at the Bureau and at COSMOS Corporation (EQuAL project contractor), and individuals subscribed to relevant electronic listservs requesting information about ongoing work related to adult learner competencies. The researchers contacted resource people, collecting reports and other information on adult competency efforts in various states (e.g., Washington, Iowa, Connecticut, Wisconsin). Project staff also contacted the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) to obtain information on learner outcomes identified through their "Equipped for the Future" System Reform Initiative (National Institute for Literacy, 1995). In addition, reports on and products related to adult learner competencies were collected from AdvancE, the Institute's in-house and Penn State's research libraries, and the ERIC system.

Finally, researchers collected test samples and examined competencies underlyng selected assessment systems (i.e., *Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, Tests of Adult Basic Education, WorkKeys*).

Messages were posted to NWAC (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative listserv); VOCNET (vocational education); SKILLSNET (school to work and occupational skills); and NIFL-WORKPLACE, NIFL-FAMILY, and NIFL-ESL (National Institute for Literacy listservs on workplace and family literacy, and English as a Second Language)] to identify and collect existing and emerging lists of adult learner competencies. Staff also searched World Wide Web pages to identify and collect additional lists of competencies. For example, the U.S. Department of Labor's home page includes information on all of the Occupational Skill Standards projects, most of which list work-focused competencies, as well as O*NET, which describes prerequisite basic skills and occupational competencies.

Review of Information

Work done by the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (1991) and work currently underway through the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor Skill Standards projects (1994) provided a starting point for reviewing potential competencies. In addition, two well-established assessment systems — the National External Diploma Program (National EDP, 1995) and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS, 1989) — list competencies as well as procedures for determining mastery of the competencies. These four resources are briefly described below.

The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) identified competencies that were felt to be essential to either work preparation or for further education. These skills include basic skills (reading, writing, math, speaking listening), thinking skills (creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, seeing things in the mind's eye, knowing how to learn, and reasoning), and personal qualities (individual responsibility, self-esteem, sociability, self management, and integrity/honesty).

The U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, through skills standards projects, are seeking to tie education more closely to the needs of the workplace. It is expected that the voluntary standards will improve information available to students, prospective job applicants and employers: "A set of skill standards for a relevant occupation will let employers know more about what job applicants can do, and tell students what types of skills they need to acquire to be eligible for particular jobs or occupations." (Askov, 1996)

The *Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System* (CASAS) was developed to measure knowledge in 35 competency areas within the general life skills categories of Consumer Economics, Community Resources, Health, Occupational Knowledge, Government and Law, and Domestic Skills. Appropriate for use with ABE, ESL and secondary school students, CASAS was "developed and calibrated to measure life skills along a continuum of difficulty" (CASAS, 1989).

The National External Diploma Program (EDP) grants high school credentials to adults who are able to demonstrate high school level skills acquired through schooling or life experience. This process "expects adults to demonstrate their ability in a series of simulations that parallel job and life experience" (National EDP, 1995). Adults are required to demonstrate competence in 64 general competencies and in one individualized vocational skill, covering the areas of communication, computation, self-awareness, social awareness, consumer awareness, scientific awareness, and occupational preparedness. Critical thinking, contextual skills, and the ability to gather and manipulate data are measured as adults solve simulated problems which have social and personal relevance.

In addition to the documents described above, the researchers examined materials from the National Workplace Literacy Program in Lake County (Illinois), Basic Education Curriculum Task Force (Wisconsin), California Department of Education *ESL Model Standards for ABE Programs*, National Center for Postsecondary Teaching, and competencies initiatives from Australia and Britain as well as those from Iowa, Connecticut, and Washington. In addition, project staff reviewed the 1985 *Mainstream English Language*

Training (MELT) Project and selected Section 353 products related to competencies (e.g., *APL Made Easy* , 1979; Harrisburg School District high school diploma program, 1978).

Generally, researchers found that competencies were described in terms of basic literacy skills (i.e., communication, numeracy, higher order) or in terms of several skills applied in a specific context (e.g., map reading). In some cases, the descriptions were mixed, including both basic literacy skills and applied skills (e.g., CASAS competencies). Some competencies reports included "soft skills" such as self-efficacy, interpersonal skills, and systems knowledge. Although many similarities were found in terms of the skills, definitions of the skills, application of the skills, and levels of performance varied significantly. This added to the difficulty of synthesizing the data.

Organization of Information

To facilitate categorizing the lists of competencies for analysis, project staff designed matrix, or framework, built on criteria identified collaboratively by the researchers, Bureau staff, and staff at COSMOS Corporation. Discussion with Bureau and COSMOS Corporation EQuAL Project staff determined that the project should focus on identifying lists of skills competencies with examples of how the skills could be taught within specific adult contexts. The skills selected include basic and higher order communication (reading, writing, speaking, listening), numeracy, and emerging skill areas (e.g., employability skills). English as a Second Language (ESL) communication skills would be integrated rather than separated from basic communication skills. Ongoing negotiations with key individuals, however, resulted in ESL competencies being separated from general ABLE competencies and practitioners encouraged to use existing ESL competencies (i. e., *Mainstream English Language Training* and CASAS competencies).

2. Produce lists of adult learner competencies and recommendations.

Lists of Competencies

With the framework in place, project staff again reviewed and identified skills delineated in the materials. These skills were used to generate a draft list of competencies that

included the skill's source/s (e.g., "Use context clues to learn unfamiliar vocabulary words and distinguish meanings of homographs." was found in CASAS, the National External Diploma Program, the SCANS report, California ESL Model Standards, and the Wisconsin model). After this step was accomplished, common skills were combined and recategorized; general skills were identified and aligned with subskills.

Working group members requested that the competencies be divided into levels to address adults' various levels of performance and knowledge. Further analysis separated the subskills into three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced. Division of the lists into levels facilitated linking selected standardized assessments to identified skills. Finally, sample applications were assigned to the main skills at each level to illustrate how the skills list can be use to develop curricula in adult contexts (family, work, community) and encourage the transfer of skills to various settings.. A sample matrix is included in the Appendix.

Recommendations

Project staff, with input from working group members, drafted recommendations concerning additional development and refinement of the competencies and potential integration of the lists of competencies with ongoing Bureau activities. These recommendations are listed in the final section of the report.

3. Review and validate the competencies.

Conversations with Bureau and EQuAL staff identified members for the working group. These six working group members were individuals with experience in the EQuAL project and/or experience in contextualized instruction (e.g., family literacy, workplace literacy), ABLE instructors, and program administrators; these individuals are listed under *Key Personnel*. Project staff contacted the potential members, requesting their participation in the project. All agreed to participate; however, subsequently, active working group members diminished. One member changed jobs and one could not attend meetings and did not reply to requests for feedback. Representation from the field, however, was enhanced by the participation of two administrators of Professional Development Centers.

Project staff met twice to discuss the structure of the draft lists and to review the reordered and leveled lists; feedback from these meetings was used to finalize the lists and to assign sample applications to the competencies at each level. Initial response to the concept of adult learner competencies was positive. No one objected to the implementation of adult learner competencies in ABLE programs, although extended discussion ensued on the applicability of a skills-based vs. a task-based list (e.g., CASAS or APL competencies). This issue was not resolved and is discussed under *Objectives Met/Not Met*. Working group members were most interested in discussing the implementation of the competencies by program staff: How would they be used for curriculum development and instruction? How would training and ongoing technical assistance be accomplished? How would the competencies relate to assessment? How did the Bureau expect to use the competencies? Subsequent discussion with the Bureau indicated that these questions would be addressed in a follow-up study during the next fiscal year.

Objectives Met/Not Met

Although all objectives were met, all experienced delays. This project was more complex than originally conceived with several issues contributing to it complexity. Although the purpose of the project was only to produce the competencies lists, these issues had to be considered during development if the competencies were to be useful to the ABLE system in the future. The decision to describe the competencies as discrete skills rather than applications of the skills was not simple or obvious. Decisions concerning the future use of the competency lists also were difficult. due, in part, to project staff's and working group members' concerns about implementing the list in practice.

Discrete Skills vs. Application

The original intent of this project was to identify competencies focused on the application of basic skills in adult contexts — family, community, work — as illustrated by Adult Performance Levels, or APL, (1979) and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, or CASAS, (1989). APL and CASAS competencies focus on adults' ability to

perform literacy related tasks; for example, a CASAS competency might require a learner to interpret medicine labels (CASAS Competency 3.3.2). Adult learners are often most interested and engaged in educational activities that help them to accomplish important tasks such as this; however, teaching the tasks themselves may result in difficulties for the instructor and, ultimately, for the learner.

For the instructor, problems in teaching literacy-related tasks may arise in determining specific basic skills that the student needs to learn to accomplish the task. For example, what skills are needed to interpret medicine labels? Minimally, this task would require knowledge of vocabulary, ability to follow directions (sequencing), and ability to understand and apply concepts related to time and measurement. An instructor who is unfamiliar with or inexperienced in identifying embedded skills may have trouble locating skills in which the learner has either strengths or weaknesses. This, in fact, has been discussed as a drawback of using competency-based assessment instruments for diagnostic purposes. [This does not imply that competency-based assessment instruments are poor choices — only that they have drawbacks in terms of diagnosing learners' specific skill strengths and weaknesses. Assessments that focus on skills achievement, on the other hand, are criticized for emphasizing discrete skills rather than their application in authentic tasks.]

Competencies that focus on the ability to perform tasks potentially number in the hundreds to account for all — or even a sample — of the activities and tasks that adults are expected to perform in their daily lives. CASAS, for example, includes 300 competencies. In addition, the EFF initiative's development of adult role maps and key activities (Stein, 1997) provides a research-based map of the types of activities and tasks that adults are expected to accomplish. Therefore, it seemed logical for the Pennsylvania adult learner competencies focus on skills — which do not duplicate the efforts underway nationally, enabling programs to integrate the skills competencies with activities defined within the EFF role maps as well as tasks identified by adult learners.

The number of discrete skills enumerated for communication and numeracy competence also are limited. As a result, a list of skills competencies provides educators with a limited number options in terms of skills but an unlimited number of tasks and activities in which they may be applied. In this way, programs that have developed competency-based programs can still use these skills-based competency lists to supplement their curriculum. Others may use the lists to assist them in identifying specific skills embedded in learner-selected educational activities. A final consideration led to this project's focus on skill competencies: research that suggests that the transferability of skills, while still difficult, can be enhanced by practicing skills in various contexts.

Although the decision to adopt a skills-based approach seemed appropriate, questions remain in the field (based on working group reactions) about the use of competencies stated as applications — the more commonly understood definition of competencies (e.g., Adult Performance Levels, or APL, 1979; Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, or CASAS, 1989). Resolution of this issue will be addressed as part of professional development efforts with an emphasis on encouraging practitioners to 1) teach learner skill competencies in the relevant and meaningful contexts of adult life roles and 2) include opportunities for learners to practice the skills in various contexts to promote skill transfer.

Future Use of Competencies

Working group members immediately saw the value of competencies as a useful tool but went beyond the basic concept to envision how the list could be implemented in programs for instruction and assessment and to identify the Bureau's expectations of how the lists would be used as part of a statewide system. They were interested in conceptualizing how the competencies would be used in programs rather than in determining the validity of the skills for adult learners. These discussions, while valuable, were less effective than expected in finalizing the competency lists. On the other hand, working group feedback was useful in determining the need for a project that would address their concerns about the future use of the competencies in ABLE programs.

Evaluation Instruments/Techniques

Formative Evaluation and Recordkeeping

Formative evaluation allowed project staff to refine their approach to the project and respond to potential barriers; therefore, formative measures were included in each objective. *Project records* documented progress toward each objective and assisted staff in revising the projected activities as necessary. The formative evaluation plan included internal quality control measures and external review. Dr. Askov and Ms. Van Horn communicated to ensure that the timelines were being met for each objective — or adjusted realistically in response to barriers.

1. Research and analyze existing and emerging lists of adult learner competencies to reflect the application of literacy skills within relevant adult contexts.

The use of a working group, other experts, and solicitation of input via electronic networks further ensured that the literature review was complete and the data analysis was comprehensive. Feedback from the working group, the Bureau, and other advisors assisted in revising and refining the research approach. Many resources were obtained through these contacts and analyzed. The decision to use discrete skills rather than applications as a focus for the lists was informed through feedback from all key parties.

2. Produce lists of adult learner competencies and recommendations for integrating the competencies with ongoing ABLE efforts.

Working group members and other experts ensured that the lists of competencies were understandable and usable. Feedback from the working group concerning the future use of the competencies was used in framing recommendations, particularly in voicing the need for professional development to encourage ABLE providers to use the lists in their programs.

3. Review the project products and validate adult learner competencies.

Although the working group as asked for feedback concerning the validity of the competencies, they were more concerned with the future use of the competencies in their programs than with determining the validity of the competencies. Feedback from the group was used to rewrite and relevel some of the skills.

Dissemination

Pennsylvania's literacy resource centers received copies of the final project and competencies reports. The Bureau received 40 copies of the competencies report for distribution. Representatives from several states contacted project staff directly to request a copy of the competencies report. The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy also disseminated project information on relevant listservs, and *What's the Buzz?* covered the project in several articles throughout the year. Ms. Van Horn submitted a proposal to present information about the research and guide at the 1997 PAACE Midwinter Conference in Hershey, PA; however, this proposal was rejected. Subsequently, Ms. Van Horn submitted a proposal to present at the PAACE Midwinter Conference 1998.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Stein (1995), reporting on the purposes that adult learners' list for becoming literate, points out that "adults see reading and writing not as goals in and of themselves, but "as a necessary starting point for engagement in the world" (24) Therefore, adult education programs that base their programs on the assumption that literacy is only about developing discrete skills such as reading and writing are delivering a message that presents literacy education as having very narrow goals and purposes that may be inappropriate for the expressed needs of the learners.

Today, adult education programs must focus on developing basic and higher order literacy skills — ABLE programs' basic mission — but also look beyond them to assist learners in applying those skills in realistic and practical contexts. In developing Pennsylvania's lists of competencies, project staff reviewed many documents; each used a combination of basic or foundation skills, higher order (e.g., problem-solving, critical thinking), "soft skills" (e.g., interpersonal skills, systems, resources and technology) to define adult competencies, and contextualized tasks (e.g., using banks and financial services; accessing health care systems; using the postal system) to define the skills and knowledge that adult learners need to function effectively in today's society. It is essential that adult educators

consider both skills and knowledge, designing and delivering instruction that engages the adult in meaningful learning as well as providing opportunities to practice and apply skills in diverse contexts.

The skill competencies will provide several opportunities for practitioners to refine curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices to better meet the educational needs of learners. It is recommended that practitioners use the competencies

1. as a framework for designing curricula and instruction that reflect adults' roles and their application of basic skills within these contexts;
2. to link specific basic skills development more closely with learner-selected activities and tasks; and
3. to link curricula to program assessment plans.

It is also recommended that programs participating in the EQuaL initiative use the competencies as a backdrop for reflecting on current instructional and assessment practices and developing program improvement plans.

Finally, it is recommended that the Bureau of ABLE use the competencies framework

1. to expand efforts to document learner gains;
2. to support the development of competency-based contextualized curricula and assessment strategies; and
3. to encourage dialogue among diverse agencies and organizations serving adult learners.

These efforts and others ultimately will contribute to improved accountability procedures for Pennsylvania ABLE programs.

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1996-97

Skill	Sample Contextual Applications			Assessment
Reading: Vocabulary	**Family Context**	**Work Context**	**Community Context**	
Use word recognition skills to identify unfamiliar vocabulary.	Use knowledge of phonics and linguistic patterns to identify basic/simple vocabulary in recipes.	Use knowledge of phonics and linguistic patterns to identify basic vocabulary in job applications.	Use knowledge of phonics and linguistic patterns to identify basic vocabulary in a bus schedule.	TABE 7/8, Level E ABLE Level 1
Reading: Literal Comprehension				
Locate specific details to understand literal meaning of text.	Given a prescription, locate information that indicates 1) how much medicine should be taken and 2) how often it should be taken.	Given a pay stub, locate information that indicates 1) the gross income for pay period and 2) the amount of federal tax withheld.	Given a newspaper article on voting, locate 1) the deadline for voter registration and 2) location of nearest polling site.	TABE 7/8, Level M ABLE Level 2 CASAS Level B
Math: Measurement				
Use appropriate processes to solve problems for perimeter, surface area, and volume.	Given the outer dimensions of a garden, determine its perimeter.	Given adequate information on building a structure, determine its surface area.	Given the dimensions of a recycling bin, determine its volume.	TABE 7/8, Level D CASAS C/D
Writing: Expository				
Compose organized, coherent sentences and paragraphs.	Write a note to teacher concerning child's homework.	Write a memo to employer concerning a workplace condition.	Write a simple letter to government official expressing opinion.	CASAS C/D holistic evaluation

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